

## PENTECOST XVIII

*Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*

Several years ago I was driving up to our house in Maine, when I was passed by an SUV on the highway just beyond Portland. I wish I could tell you I always adhere strictly to the speed limit, but that would be a lie. So, this SUV was in a big hurry, and as it passed I saw the bumper sticker, which said, *There is No Secular World.*

I then read the license plate, a vanity plate (Maine may be the leader in vanity plates) and realized that I had just been passed by the bishop of Maine, on her way to somewhere in, presumably, her non-secular world.

I’m not sure whether Jesus would agree with the former bishop’s bumper sticker. If he could imagine cars, or bumper stickers, or, above all, vanity plates (but if the former, probably the latter, as Jesus’ world was filled with vanity in the upper reaches of the social strata)

Today’s Gospel does not solve the question of church and state. It’s not iconoclastic to government or our obligations to “the secular world.” Jesus gives space to political arrangements, space, but not ultimacy.

When Jesus asks for a coin, he demands, *Whose head (eikon, image) is this, and whose title?* The coin bears Caesar’s image and belongs to Caesar. But we, humans, bear the *eikon*, the image of God. We may pay our taxes, but we do not belong to the government, as Jesus’ followers did not,

emphatically, belong to the emperor. We ourselves belong to God. That's our ultimate belonging.

So that means that God and Caesar— or the “secular world”— are not equal, nor are they symbolic names for separate realms. Quite the opposite. We bear God's image, and so wherever we live and operate, we belong to God. Our primary allegiance does not switch when we leave this building.

We come to church each week, I believe, to reaffirm that allegiance, to be reminded what the allegiance means, and to be renewed in our resolve to carry the meaning and implications of our faith back out into the world. Sometimes that's a very difficult task, involving struggles not only with others but with ourselves: struggles not to be overwhelmed with anger, sadness, or a sense of futility. Struggles not to succumb to prejudice, fear, or apathy.

Last week I was reading over the comments people wrote at our annual meeting last year about why they attend St. John's. Here are a few of them

*St John's has become our main community, a primary source of friendship. My partner and I wanted our daughter to have a spiritual foundation and, as a lesbian couple, sought a setting where we didn't risk her hearing disparaging remarks about our family from the pulpit/community. We have found this at St. John's.*

*One Sunday Anne gave a sermon that spoke to the language of the Eucharist and how it affected people with different life experiences, particularly those who had suffered abuse. Not only did this sermon speak to me in ways that sermons hadn't for a long time, but it brought me to tears — and I knew that I had found a beautiful, inclusive (radically inclusive!) loving community where I could bring my children with joy each week.*

*The reason I love St. John's is that the doors are open. Not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. Over two years ago the doors were open when I needed them to be. I thank St. John's for that day.*

*Having grown up in a conservative church, I'm grateful to have found a place where I can be myself, with my questions and doubts, without feeling I have to hide or pretend.*

*St. John's was a place that would allow us to grieve and strengthen during recovery. With help from the community and rector we were able to move on with our lives and become better people in the end.*

These are some of the attachments we have to our community of faith. Some of the meanings and values we pledge ourselves to each week, and commit ourselves to living out in the world beyond our doors.

*St. John's: Our Home, Our Church, Our Future.* I was asking my granddaughter the other day about her friends at her new school. She has trouble remembering their names but then she came up with a couple. Then she said, "Anna, but Anna always says, 'you are not my friend.'" "Does that hurt your feelings?" I inquired. "No," replied Amelia, "I just say, we are all friends." That's the message she's taking out from her home.

I was talking to a St John's mother after church last week, and in the course of the conversation she said, speaking both to me and her daughter, "God loves all families, right?" That's the message we take out from our home, our church. That's the message of our future, the future of hope, the future of the world, secular or divine. And we are the ambassadors of that message, Christ's ambassadors.

We are in the season now of stewardship, although stewardship should not be a season but a way of life. What I mean is that we are in the season of our annual pledge drive, and the beginning of the "unquiet" phase

of our capital campaign for building restoration. I pray that you enter into the spirit of this season, and these campaigns, with full hearts: hearts full of gratitude for our community. We need all that you can give, so that we can, we hope, give you all you need. All you need, that is, to go out into the world, once again, filled with the faith and hope that is God's promise to us: *We ourselves belong to God. That's our ultimate belonging. We are God's children, God's beloved.* .

Alleluia! Amen